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Senate acts to improve Medicaid drug process

LANSING -The Michigan Senate passed two bills Wednesday in an effort to update and improve the state's Pharmaceutical Best Practices Initiative for Medicaid pharmaceuticals.

The plan, in place since February 2002, utilizes a preferred drug list and prior authorization program for Medicaid beneficiaries.

Senate Bill 831, sponsored by Sen. Tom George, MD, R-Texas Township, amends the Public Health Code to revise composition of the Michigan Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee. This committee, which reviews new and existing prescription medications for inclusion on the state's Preferred Drug List, was created by executive order in 2000.

"By placing the Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee in statute, we are establishing a known entity which only the Legislature can alter," George said. "We have made some important modifications to the membership of the committee and created ways for the department and providers to communicate more efficiently. This will undoubtedly result in improved patient care."

Senate Bill 832, sponsored by Sen. Beverly Hammerstrom, R-Temperance, exempts certain classes of drugs, as well as select medications used for specific disease treatment from the Best Practices Initiative. This ensures that patients and doctors will not have to go through a time-consuming process for approval to use the drugs. Prescriptions in the following classes would be permanently exempt from placement on the Preferred Drug List and from any type of prior authorization: antipsychotics, antidepressants, anticonvulsants, and antianxiety medications. In addition, any drug necessary to treat HIV/AIDS, cancer, epilepsy or seizure disorder, and organ replacement therapy, or symptoms of these diseases is also exempt.

Hammerstrom, chair of the Senate Health Policy Committee, sees the bill as necessary protection for the state's most vulnerable citizens.

"We want to ensure that there is no future temptation to restrict these classes of drugs," Hammerstrom said. "I understand the Best Practices Initiative is essential in helping the state control prescription drug costs, but it was never intended to force very sick individuals or their physicians to jump through hoops to obtain medications."

The bills now move to the House of Representatives for consideration.